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ABSTRACT

Employing a body of texts for the reading and study of literature in the English classroom leads to much argumentation, with much disagreement about what is fair game for the writing student. To help determine which texts to select it is necessary to define cultural literacy in a different way from that of E. D. Hirsch. Hirsch would prescribe definitions of culture--or its relation to language--that would invalidate the experiences, ethics, and aspirations of our students. Instead, cultural literacy can be that which Mikhail Bakhtin called the "carnivalesque," or those words and speeches valued in public places of celebration. This extra-academic valuation of texts gives rise to "the vulgar canon": texts which do not normally enter the classroom context but which have been given value in other contexts, primarily those of the home or "popular culture." Three good reasons for using this canon are: (1) the recognition by the teacher of this hidden canon can facilitate the teaching of writing in what Bakhtin calls the "special collectivity;" (2) it can empower Bakhtin's "carnivalesque crowd," the source of that socially constructed, "unofficial speech" the teacher must encourage through assignments sensitive to the contemporary text, the unwritten text, the visual text, and the moving image; and (3) it may draw two communities--the academic and the carnivalesque--into direct engagement rather than maintaining the usual respectful, or disrespectful, distance. (Four references are appended.) (MS)

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The Vulgar Canon and Its Uses in the Classroom

Abstract

The paper argues for a "cultural literacy" very different from that espoused by Hirsch--rather, that which Bakhtin called the "carnivalesque," or those words and speeches valued in the public places of celebration. This extra-academic valuation of texts gives rise, in this paper, to "the vulgar canon": texts which do not normally enter the classroom context but which have been given value in other contexts, primarily those of the home or "popular culture."

Moving from Hirsch to Babcock--an anthropologist whose definition of reading emphasizes cultural alternatives--the paper employs Bakhtin's "norm-free" definition of social intercourse to introduce several techniques for integrating popular texts (a term widely defined to include visual and graphic languages) into reading and writing classrooms, effecting a better relationship between private and public contexts of our language-use. These techniques spring from the construction of a "personal canon," which is then placed in fruitful opposition to the literary or academic canon under usual consideration.

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The Vulgar Canon and Its Uses in the Classroom

When I began to teach at the University of Hawaii I found myself asking the self-conscious questions new teachers sometimes inflict upon themselves, namely, "What is my function here? What should it be? Why should it be? What is the function, by the way, of English? of English departments? of literature? of composition? of instruction?" Have I missed any?

It may be that the key word in those questions asked is "function"--that is, if we are, at first anyway, to look unsystematically for clues to the direction I find myself following. An adhering to function , I believe, signals a search for a working place, and suggests a social commitment within the larger political framework that any public institution inhabits. My "function"--and the function of the university--would seem to be to contribute to the maintenance and evolution of a basically humanistic culture--one that America espouses, no matter what theoretical or practical sway we find ourselves acting under. That, anyway, is the mostly undifferentiated ground upon which I stood, arriving there.

Surely one function of the writing classroom is to assist the student in learning how to write better; I suspect there is no more harmless statement in our field. So allow me to add a second one: the reading and study of literature is a means by which we teach better writing. But how to define literature--and how to select it--and then how to employ that body of texts in the classroom leads to much argumentation, much disagreement about what

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is fair game for the writing student, what is perhaps too-fair, i.e. too lofty for the freshman student--is Proust in any freshman anthologies? is Goethe?--and on the other hand, what is too vulgar, too common to be sanctioned under the cynosure of the academy.

We have these decisions of value to make; their visible operations range from flipping through the new batch of readers to asking a visiting writer to run the silent gauntlet of our students' eyes for a class period. The more ingrained, ineffable moments of value-making are bound up with our own educations, the politics of educational institutions, and the politics of our government.

And now I move, as if I have stumbled across the threshold of the university, to the subject of cultural literacy. The term is, unfortunately, now contaminated by its recent use by E. D. Hirsch, the attendant parlor games surrounding his notorious listing of "What Literate Americans Know"--they know the slough of Despond, slow but sure, small intestine, smallpox, smell a rat, Smith, Adam, Smith, John, Smithsonian, smog, snake in the grass, Snow White, and socialism (204). Secretary of Education William Bennett has embraced this definition to his bosom and has recently sent Hirsch lots of research money and even given him a stake in the D. of E.'s mythical high school, James Madison, in which to make specific his agenda for America.

But cultural literacy, if we may de-Hirsch it for a while, seems to me to be an ideal term by which to name a principle that English Departments operate under, or for. We recognize this principle in many ways: core curricula in our lower schools, reading and writing instruction in even our pre-schools, canon recognition by virtually every textbook publisher in this country, survey courses at secondary levels which are thinly disguised fast-food versions of core curricula, standardized testing--in both content and

writing areas--with little regard to diversity and with great regard to "shared knowledge."

Such, we would say, are the inherent necessities of a literate democracy, as grounded in the mostly passive reception of knowledge canonized by a group of people like us. It is our function, we would say, to open perhaps the final door on behalf of the system that values us--that door leading into occupational America.

But surely something is missing here. We can raise the cry of the British farceur, "Who's in charge here?" and score easy points against Hirsch and Bennett for their absurd call for a sort of Academie Americaine, raising the specter of Mortimer J. Adler and his Great Books, enlisting those beaver-like industrious professors in the humanities and sciences willing to lock tooth and claw over whether the Beatles are canonical (they are), whether acetominophen is known to the literate (no), whether Sam Shepherd is ready for the dubbing (apparently not), and whether the godfather of this corrupt quantification of value in the political sphere, Ronald Reagan, should himself gain access to the emblematic (Yes) (146ff).

There are other things missing from Hirsch's version of good literacy; listen to his core definition: "to be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world" (xiii). Since I am trying to remain true to my initial concerns about function, I will just touch upon the notion of "thriving" in the modern world and say that, despite Hirsch's attempt to provide a sort of miniature culture of the world, this definition of "use" brings to mind the student we have all had who has no interest in culture but who is all ears for "thriving"--i.e. fitting in, doing what is right.

I am reminded of John Warnock, who remarks that a cultivated Nazi is still

a Nazi. The assumptions of value that Hirsch's cultural literacy make are familiar and distasteful to those of us who believe that education should not engender sameness but difference, and should encourage not acquiescence, but criticism.

We all have our favorite texts, favorite ideas--around which we construct defenses, bulwarks against assault. We have perhaps internalized these texts to the point of their becoming literally ours. Indeed, reception theory encourages such a view--the subjective criticism of David Bleich, for example, would not deny that, for Eskimos, William Faulkner was writing about Eskimos.

Can we encourage--or should we encourage--similar behavior in our students? I think I would like them to find their own favorites, of course, but the dialectic I mentioned earlier would seem to crumble here under a chaos of value-making, a destabilizing of "the core" knowledge universities are preserving. Visions of the late 1960s rise up: the teacherless class, relevance, counter-schools, tear gas. Composition studies now are concerned very much with discourse communities, the social construction of language, a sensitivity to contexts--yet none I have read deal effectively with the ultimate, if implied, result of such studies--a pedagogy that freely allows the making not only of meaning, but of value.

And here we play right into Hirsch's--and Allan Bloom's--hands. Talk of individual literacies, free-floating discourse communities transacting at will under self-made rules, the deconstructionist's delight at the moment when unity becomes illusion--all of these things have contributed to the movement toward standardization, stabilization, uniformity not only of the English we use but of the texts we "possess"--as if Goethe were a telephone number.

My sympathies are split; I shudder when someone says that Jason Compson was an okay guy, trying to keep his family together, make a little money. The hell he was, I want to say--stepping on his invalid interpretation. Or is it; Hirsch's former life as an advocate of the discoverability of authors' intentions raises its ugly head on my behalf, not the student's. And it is the articulation of independent thought that we do, after all, value. And must not crush, even at the expense of our Great Books.

Hirsch says very little about writing as a component of literacy--I think this is so not because he is not familiar with its theories or pedagogy, but because he cannot see, as I suggested earlier, beyond the great and hard challenge of sameness in the possessing, i.e. the competent reading, of words, phrases, whole texts. But writing is surely the activity by which we prove our literacies--especially in the academic context I have been describing. What makes composition--and the teaching of writing--so important now is the countervalence they provide. And, furthermore, the critical apparatus they provide for every person who is confronted, in any context, with the kind of authoritarian program Hirsch and Bennett have proposed.

How, then, do we avoid making the mistake Hirsch has made, avoid prescribing definitions of culture--or its relation to language--that will invalidate the experiences, ethics, and aspirations of our students?

I introduce here a quotation from Barbara Babcock, an anthropologist, who writes on the subject of "symbolic inversion":

> Symbolic inversion may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political. (17)

Ira Shor's recent study on "culture wars" situates this inverting more closely to the educational system, and uncovers, I believe, a tension that exists between our value-making and the value-making of our students via literature in the classroom (Shor 186-191). And as Babcock goes on to say, "what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central, and if we ignore or minimize inversion and other forms of cultural negation, we often fail to understand the dynamics of symbolic processes generally" (20).

What I find in my students is the socially peripheral "vulgar canon," which is symbolically central to their lives but which is displaced or attacked by the institutional presentation of a canon--a high or academic canon which shows little or no overlap to that body of texts the student values. What to do with these out-of-school texts? Can we let song lyrics, love letters, hot rod magazines, snapshots, torrid romances, heavy metal sturm-und-drang into the classroom for anything more than novelty value, a little bit of sweetener to a week that may find the student terribly tired of writing reaction papers to yet another John Steinbeck novella?

The uses of this vulgar canon--whatever the student never thinks of as literature or culturally acceptable art, and which would be invalidated the moment a teacher said it might be acceptable--these uses are threefold. First, the recognition by the teacher of this hidden canon, this peripheral body of texts can facilitate the teaching of writing in what Bakhtin calls the "special collectivity" (187). This collectivity or special argot is the social intercourse, freed from norms, that is, in fact, the fluency of those students who remain mute in our classrooms. Second, the vulgar canon can be used to to empower Bakhtin's "carnivalesque crowd" (188), the source of that socially constructed, "unofficial speech" the teacher must encourage through

assignments sensitive to the contemporary text, the unwritten text, the visual text, the moving image--or those modes that seem to touch upon both academic and non-academic contexts. Third, to use the vulgar canon may draw two communities--the academic and the carnivalesque--into direct engagement rather than the usual respectful, or disrespectful, distance.

And yet we all have our great books; with some high degree of agreement, we can say, for example, that a literate student must know his or her genre, major author, special topic--and so forth. Those terms, when defined, exclude an enormous body of text that we consider not relevant to the education of that student. In other contexts, of course, those texts are themselves constitutive of other canons, other blueprints, as it were. We cannot confine our student freedom to interpretation--indeed, much audience-oriented criticism is politicized, or psychologized, for the sake of the reader who has been perceived as disenfranchised by the academy. What must become "audience-oriented" is not only the perceptions of the text (as if there is comfort in that some of those perceptions will still touch upon the New Critic's turf) but the source of the text itself.

The "source" of the text puzzles the student. Where, after all, did The Scarlet Letter come from? Hawthorne, of course, but also that tenth grade teacher. Does a text automatically gain value via its selection process? No, but the student infers this as the text is inspected. And conversely, and unfortunately, the texts selected by that student--rarely without a conscious attention to value, be it for entertainment or pleasure or escape or learning or for the simple sake of commonality or sharing with a peer group--remain uninspected by the community of teachers.

Mass culture--out of which is constructed what I have termed the vulgar

canon--exhibits a disorganization, a carnivalesque changeability that requires weekly magazines to track its values; it is such changeability that requires much of academia to see its vulgarity as rooted in the ephemeral, the quick fix for an ennui that must not be felt in the presence of masters, but only in the presence of hacks.

I think we need to paraphrase Stanley Fish and say that "Everything has value"--and nothing may escape the judging of value, and proceed to acknowledge that by no means must we permit cartoons and motorcycle posters into our classrooms--unless we recognize that a dialectic of canons, or to adapt Shor here, a war of texts can lead to fruitful results in both reading and writing. We may have not brought the carnival into the classroom, but we have begun to recognize that language-use, if it is to be truly social, must manifest itself as dialog and dialectic.

The dialog can begin this way: the student brings to class a favorite object--no limits on type. The object is then treated as a valued "bridge" to a memory, act, story, place, loved one.

Second, the object is read, and written upon. This can be done in several ways: an oral, voluntary presentation by the student, expressing the value of the object. Presentations can be purely expository, or can take the form of storytelling, mime, drawing, reader's theatre, music, or combinations of these. Or there may be a written version of the above, in a focused 10 or 15 minute writing session. A third option is the written speculation on another introduced object--a partner's for instance, after the class is paired off. This speculative writing can encourage free use of the imagination, and also the writer's real (if limited) knowledge of both partner and object. Another way to read the object, and to write upon it, is a written speculation on any object the student has chosen from those brought to class; a "free-for-all" in

which the student can argue for the particular value of any object, according to its probable uses, monetary worth, sentimental value.

The next step in this process of canonizing the non-canonical is the defining of value: the class discusses why we must read and write certain texts, and as a group activity the class gathers more examples of the school's and/or teacher's "favorites", i.e. required texts and activities; and individual students begin to construct the personal canon--texts as varied as movies, snapshots, music and stories. The student may discover intersections of these two canons, or the student may find only difference; either finding can lead to a second round of reading and writing on the meanings of value.

A discussion of the need to recognize individual and social values, and how they can interact in both comfortable and adversarial ways in our reading and writing can begin to draw confidence and assertiveness into the student's uses of language. The student should be encouraged to understand the diversity of values placed on texts--how various discourse communities seem to define value--and how texts can be those things in which we have invested our thoughts and feelings, and the values of both authors and audiences.

Finally, the student in this progression of activities can become the teacher. I suggest three options. One, each student prepares and delivers a "lesson" on a text of his or her own choice; "text" is still used broadly here. By lesson I suggest an attempt to argue for a text's worth. In short, the power of the object should be made clear. Two, each student compares in written or verbal forms a personal choice with a school text, thereby investing a home or personal text with the attention and care and value we as teachers place on canonical texts. Third, each student writes a persuasive piece on why he or she should be allowed to replace a school text with one of

his or her own. This act of empowering can be a stimulating, carnivalesque piece of drama or fantasy--but more importantly, it can demonstrate the reality behind effective rhetoric, and the reasons for canon formation and deformation.

I return, in conclusion, to the harmless objective of helping our students to write better; the statement may indeed be harmful if it indicates a unwillingness on our part to go to the carnival, and to recognize that "better" writing cannot be transferred from any literature, or imposed upon what we may see as the clay of our students. Of course, we must also not stay too long at the fair, but enjoy, in Bakhtin's words, its "abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties" (187). Only then may we continue to construct, with sociality and sensitivity, those texts of particular value.

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